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Defection Hurt Iranian Communists

A true spy story worthy of John le Carre can now be told. It's the tale of a rising young KGB agent who defected to the British and brought about the bloody extinction of Iran's communist Tudeh Party a few months later.

The central figure in this story of intrigue and betrayal was Vladimir Andreyevich Kuzichkin, a 37-year-old KGB major operating out of the Soviet Embassy in Tehran. Fluent in Farsi, the language of Iran, Kuzichkin had been recruited at 28 into Directorate S, the most secret of all the KGB directorates and the one responsible for espionage, sabotage and assassination around the world.

Assigned to Tehran in 1977, Kuzichkin helped in several communist efforts to overthrow the shah. None succeeded. But when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalists seized power early in 1979, Tudeh leaders, with prodding from Kuzichkin, declared their unswerving support for the revolution.

Khomeini never really trusted the Iranian communists, but he used their administrative expertise in middle-level government positions, just as he accepted Soviet KGB advisers to help his own intelligence service.

Despite two promotions while in Tehran, Kuzichkin grew disenchanted with the KGB. In early 1982, he contacted the British and became a double agent.

In June 1982, things got too hot for Kuzichkin, and he defected to the British. We don't know his whereabouts from June until October, but in the latter month he was finally spirited to London for extensive debriefing by British intelligence.

It was a stunning coup for the British—the first known defection of a staff officer in Directorate S. And like any clever defector, Kuzichkin had brought along his “passport” to the West: two trunks full of documents on the Soviets’ total domination of the Iranian Communist Party.

Some of Kuzichkin's documents detailed Soviet-Tudeh plans to overthrow Khomeini—by assassination, if necessary.

The British showed a talent for manipulative treachery that would have made George Smiley blush. They secretly turned the information over to Khomeini.

Khomeini put the purloined KGB information to deadly use. Late in 1982, he began a ruthless crackdown on the Tudeh Party. In January 1983, Radio Tehran was boasting of widespread executions of Tudeh members, as many as 22 in a single day.

In May 1983, Khomeini took a leaf from Stalin's primer and produced Tudeh Party leaders to confess publicly that they had been spies for Moscow. The party's secretary-general, Nureddin Kianuri, outdid himself, claiming to have spied for the Soviets since 1945.

On May 4, Khomeini summoned Soviet Ambassador Vil K. Boldyrev and gave him a list of 18 embassy personnel who had been identified as KGB agents. They were given 48 hours to leave Iran.

The Soviets didn't have to ask who was responsible for their diplomatic embarrassment and the Tudeh Party's disaster. They knew it was Kuzichkin.